
***MORE FROM THE QUARRIES
OF LAST CHANCE GULCH***

Wickes in its Heyday

Wickes rides crest of national silver boom

Although prospectors discovered silver in Montana in 1864, initially there was little use for the metal. The mineral usually found with other metals such as gold, lead and zinc. Consequently, it required the commitment of enormous investment capital to purchase the necessary machinery to process the ore before the endeavor could run at a profit for its owners.

The territory was hampered by its isolation and the lack of a reliable transportation system. The processing machinery had to be hauled up the Montana-Utah Road or, preferably, shipped upriver to Fort Benton and then overland to its destination. The prohibitive cost of silver mining discouraged many out-of-state capitalists from investing in this abundant mineral resource.

Montana pioneer and Helena resident Samuel Hauser discovered and operated the first silver mine and smelter near Bannack in 1866. The isolation of the area, however, led him to the upper Flint Creek Valley, where he opened the territory's first large commercial silver operation in 1867 near Philipsburg.

The mine was profitable for Hauser until 1873, when an economic depression nearly caused the mine and mill to shut down. In the late 1870s, the rekindled national economy and the passage of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act guaranteed a market for all the silver that could be produced. For the next two decades, Montana rode the crest of a national silver boom.

The silver mines around Wickes were among the earliest developed in Montana. The first mine, the Gregory, was located by an unknown prospector in 1864 and was the site of the second silver smelter built in



The mountain town of Wickes is pictured in 1886.

Photos courtesy of the Montana Historical Society

Montana in 1867.

Discovered in 1869, the Alta proved to be one of the richest silver mines in Montana. In 1876, its original owners sold the property to a group of New York capitalists head by William W. Wickes. The cartel organized the Montana Company that same year and platted the community of Wickes in either 1876 or 1877. The camp had around 400 residents by 1880.

Although the Alta Mine was extremely rich, the Montana Company was forced to allow the property to languish between 1877 and 1879 because of the lack of a good transportation system and a shortage of major investment capital. Ridiculed by many because of the perceived waste of the property by Wickes and his partners, the *Helena Weekly Herald* reported that "The name of the company was a by-word, and to be on the popular and in the public favor all one had to do was to sneer and pour words of contempt upon the company and its managers."

In late 1879, however, Hauser shifted his attention away from the Philipsburg silver mines to those southwest of the Capital City. The Montana Company reorganized as the Alta Montana Company and raised \$5 million in capital with Hauser's help.

The new company paid off its debts and began a program to reopen and enlarge the mines. The Alta Company also revitalized three nearby mines that were either owned or leased by the Montana Company. The Alta Company constructed a new mill in 1880 to process the ores extracted from its mines and others, some as far away as Coeur d'Alene.

The reduction/concentrating works consisted of a waterjacketed furnace with a 50-ton capacity as well as four reverberating furnaces, each with a capacity of seven tons. The mill also included an amalgamating plant to reprocess the tailings left over from earlier mining activities. In all, the mill could refine between 70-75 tons of ore a day.

The community of Wickes was a booming, although atypically quiet, mining camp by mid-1880. The *Weekly Herald* reported that: "No liquor is allowed in the camp, and any employee who becomes intoxicated loses his place at once. The consequence is that but a small part of the dissipated element which is ordinarily found in a mining settlement of this kind is represented here."

Regardless, the camp boasted a public library and the firm of Vawter & Wickes built a substantial stone building that sold "everything which the people of the camp required."

The Alta Mine was the centerpiece of the district. It consisted of three tunnels, the deepest of which

reached 250-feet below the surface of Alta Mountain (the mine eventually bottomed out 1,600-feet below the adit.)

The mountain was reportedly honeycombed by 30 miles of tunnels, shafts and stopes. By 1889, the mine was the largest producer in the Wickes-Corbin Mining District. In 1882, disaster struck the Alta Company when a fire destroyed the mill. As a result, the company was forced to sell-out in 1883 to one of its stockholders, Sam Hauser.

Operating through the Helena Mining and Reduction Company (HMRC), Hauser paid off the Alta Company's \$250,000 debt and spent over \$90,000 rebuilding the entire silver mill. He added two new concentrators and six new charcoal kilns. The kilns could produce over 25,000 bushels of charcoal a month.

In 1884, the HMRC constructed a new smelter, one of the largest of its kind in Montana Territory. The new smelter included three large masonry smokestacks that eventually came to symbolize the Wickes operation. Most importantly, Hauser induced the Northern Pacific Railway to construct a branch line between Helena and Wickes. The Helena and Jefferson County Railroad gave Wickes its much needed access to outside markets. Because of it, the mine, mill and camp enjoyed its peak years of prosperity through the rest of the 1880s.

With Hauser's acquisition of the mine and mill and the arrival of the railroad, the community of Wickes flourished.

It transformed from a sober alcohol-free community to a "rip-roaring" mining camp that extended 1 1/2 miles along the gulch. The camp had between 900 to 1500 residents and included five dance halls, 22 saloons, a general store, post office, two hotels, at least one meat market, a blacksmith shop and a Presbyterian church.

Wickes was one of six communities to be listed in the territory's first telephone directory in 1885. The Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone Company served nine customers in Wickes until the telephone exchange closed in 1886. One pundit later claimed that "(playing) cards strewed the Main street so thickly that for several years a man with a team cleared the street every morning."

The community received another boost in 1886, when Jim Hill and Charles Broadwater completed their Montana Central Railroad between Great Falls and Butte. Like many of its bigger sister cities, Wickes could then claim it had two railroad depots. The expansion of the mines at Wickes spread through the district causing the establishment of other mining camps. The most important, Corbin, was platted in 1883 and claimed 100 residents the following year.

The Wickes-Corbin Mining District thrived until 1889, when the HMRC dismantled the Wickes smelter and moved it to East Helena. From then on, the ore was shipped by railcar for processing at either East Helena or Butte.

The Alta Mine operated for another seven years before it, too, closed.

In 1893, the U.S. Government repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, thus ending a steady and profitable market for the ore. The act's repeal helped precipitate a nationwide economic depression that had disastrous effects to the Wickes district and to Helena. By 1896, HMRC mining engineers believed the ore in the Alta Mine was depleted and deeper tunneling was not economically or technically feasible for the company. The Alta Mine closed after producing between 1,250,000 tons of gold, silver and lead ore, which yielded \$32 million to its owners - about 80% of the entire output of the district.

The district, however, continued to produce ore for a number of years through other operations, notably the nearby Comet and Minah mines. In 1900, the district was dealt a severe setback when the Northern Pacific Railway abandoned their branch line to Wickes.

Wickes was nearly destroyed by fires in 1901 and 1902. Seven years later, the HMRC sold its holdings in the district to the Boston and Alta Mining Company. This company held on for only a year before it sold the mine to the first in a succession of owners who had dreams for the "relentless Alta." By the 1950s, most mining activity included an open-pit operation and the reprocessing of the old tailing dumps on the hillside above Wickes. Montana Tunnels is the latest (and most

successful) of the mining companies to work the Wickes-Corbin District.

Between 1869 and 1957, the Alta mine and its sister mines produced over \$47 million in gold, silver, lead and copper. Today, little remains to represent this colorful era in Montana's mining history. Only one of the masonry smokestacks still stands at Wickes and is in danger of being demolished. Near it is the foundation of the mill that processed much of the ore extracted from Alta Mountain.

One of the beehive-shaped charcoal kilns is still in good condition - the others have been partially razed. There are still a few sanding structures on Wickes' Main Street (only one dates to before the 1901 fire); even more foundations mark the presence of other structures in the camp.

Along with Butte, Wickes was the premier silver mining camp in Montana. It was fortunate to be located at the right place, at the right time with the minerals in the right combination for processing. In a sort of backward evolutionary process, current mining operations have done much to eradicate the traces of the older mines; Mother Nature and the Abandoned Mines Reclamation Program, too, have done much to reclaim what is left. The written record and photographs will be all that is left to mark the passing of Wickes, one of Montana's greatest silver camps.

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Potter & Changler charcoal kilns near Wickes in 1886.